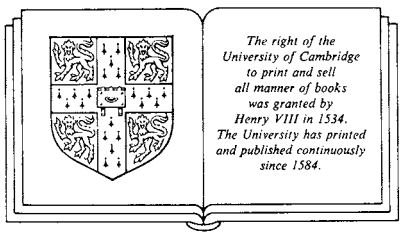
The national integration of Italian return migration, 1870–1929

DINO CINEL



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge
New York Port Chester Melbourne Sydney

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 1991
First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Cinel, Dino.
The national integration of Italian return migration, 1870–1929 /
Dino Cinel.
p. cm. – (Interdisciplinary perspectives on modern history)
ISBN 0 521 40058 9
1. Return migration – Italy – history. 2. Italy – Emigration and
immigration – History. 3. United States – Emigration and immigration –
History. I. Title. II. Series.
JV8132.C56 1991
304.8'0945–dc20 91-6989 CIP

ISBN 0 521 40058 9 hardback
ISBN 0 521 52118 1 paperback

Contents

Introduction: Emigration and the process of national integration

Return migration is today a worldwide phenomenon. According to an estimate by the United Nations, as many as one hundred million people engage every year in seasonal migrations. The phenomenon affects virtually every nation that has significant emigration or immigration. In Europe, for instance, return migration is today a mass phenomenon in Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Spain. For several decades West Germany, France, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries have been nations of immigration. In absolute numbers, Italy is the largest participant in the phenomenon. From 1945 to 1983 about eight million Italians left the country and five million returned. Within Italy, the south and the Veneto in the northeast are the regions most deeply affected by the phenomenon. Germany and Switzerland have been the preferred destinations of Italians.[1]

Individuals engaging in temporary international emigrations fall into two categories: seasonal migrants and temporary emigrants. Seasonal migrants relocate abroad for one season and return home at the end of it. In most cases the same individuals engage in seasonal migrations year after year. Immigration policies of countries of immigration are mostly responsible for seasonal migrations. For instance, Switzerland attracts tens of thousands of foreign workers every year and forces them to leave at the end of each season, the intention being to prevent these immigrants from becoming permanent residents of the Confederacy. More rarely, seasonal migrations are the result of personal choices by individuals unwilling to uproot their families from the home environment. Temporary emigrants, on the other hand, are individuals seeking employment in foreign countries for a number of years, then returning to home communities with savings. These individuals typically engage in a migration lasting several years, either to provide an income to families back home or to save money to achieve specific goals such as the purchase of land, the opening of a small business, or providing an elaborate wedding for a son or a daughter.[2]

Economists, political scientists, politicians, and social operators have been studying the impact of return migrations both in the sending and receiving countries.[3] Individuals return to native communities for many reasons, such as changes in political and economic conditions at home, undesirable changes in the countries of immigration, fulfillment of original goals, unwillingness to keep paying the high personal costs attached to seasonal and temporary emigrations, problems of adjustment in the host countries, and reassessment of the original needs that prompted emigration.[4] Regardless of the reasons advanced to go home, returnees and their savings have an impact on home communities. Individual returnees, especially if successful abroad, improve their economic conditions at home, or so they perceive upon their return. But does society in general and, specifically, do sending communities benefit economically and socially from return migration? On the surface it seems obvious that people returning with money, new skills, and broader mental horizons should become a social and economic asset. In reality returnees and their savings create a variety of social and economic problems. Inflation, decline in economic activities abandoned by temporary emigrants, discontent because of a less-than-satisfactory experience abroad, and difficulties in readjusting to life in home communities are only a few of the recurrent problems lamented by the countries reporting mass return migration.

There are two reasons why the debate as to whether return migration is a benefit or a liability for sending countries will persist for a long time. First, scholars disagree as to the very criteria to be used in assessing the social and economic impact of return migration. Second, return migrations occur in such a variety of national settings and stages of economic development that the elaboration of one model seems to be quite problematic.[5]

This book discusses return migration to Italy in the half century 1875–1925. The focus is principally on the return migration from the United States to southern Italy, although return migration from other countries and to the Italian north will be investigated at times to make comparisons. Although accurate indicators are not available, we know that millions of Italians engaged in return migration. For instance, in the period 1905–15 about two million Italians returned to Italy from overseas, two-thirds of them from the United States.[6] In percentages, other immigrant groups in the United States showed higher rates of returns than Italians did. But, in absolute numbers, more Italians returned from the United States than any other national group. The obvious question is why. Perhaps they departed from Italy with the determination to return. Or, they discovered that America was not

the land of opportunity they had been led to believe it was. If we move from the subjective to the objective study of return migration, we wonder whether Italian returnees were successful or unsuccessful individuals. Were they returnees of failure? And, once back in Italy, did these returnees succeed in establishing themselves with American money? Of course this mass phenomenon did not go unnoticed. Did Italian society at large and the Italian government in particular encourage Italians to return? Or was their coming back opposed? Did the nation at large discuss a possible integration of mass emigration and return migration in the national economy? Most importantly, the return of so many individuals with American savings was bound to have a substantial impact on local economies, especially in small towns. And they seemingly did. But was such an impact profound and lasting or superficial and ephemeral? Remittances and returnees became two of the most important topics in the Italian national discourse at the turn of the century.

In Italy the public discourse on remittances and returnees was shaped by broader concerns raised by national events. After two decades of wars and diplomatic negotiations, Italy became one nation in 1870 with Rome as capital. During the following decades, national life was characterized by more or less successful efforts at creating a national economy and at integrating the vastly different regions and cultures within a national system. Italy was not the only nation trying to emerge from narrow regionalisms and foster economic and social integrations at a national level. Most Western nations were engaged in the same process, although in different ways. But Italy soon discovered a major stumbling block in the process of national integration. Southern Italy had so many social and economic problems that the integration of that region within the nation seemed to be virtually impossible. Only a few years after political unification, the *questione meridionale* (southern problem) had become the most intractable topic in the national agenda. A number of programs were legislated and set in place to help the south catch up with the rest of the nation. But, by the turn of the century, and three decades into the national experience, the questione meridionale seemed to be more difficult than ever.

Emigration, return migration and remittances entered the public discourse at this stage. Emigration started for a number of interrelated reasons. Certainly the social and economic dislocations caused by the forced absorption of the southern regional economy into the national economy greatly contributed to the rise of the mass phenomenon. Initially, official Italy opposed the mass exodus on grounds of national security, social stability, need for manpower at home, and even pres-

tige to be maintained abroad. After all, mass emigration was an indication that Italy was less than successful in its program of national integration and economic modernization. And because the south was the region most affected by emigration, the national discourse focused on emigration as a subtopic of the southern question.

Progressively, as the programs set in place to help the south failed one by one, the topic of emigration, return migration, and remittances moved to central stage. Perhaps, some educated Italians argued, emigration was not the destabilizing force Italians said it was. Possibly, emigration was the last best hope the south had. Where the government had failed, emigration would succeed. The evidence was there for everybody to see: Returnees with American money were changing the south. From 1900 to World War I emigration and return migration as the solution of the southern questions became the preferred topic in the national discourse. For this reason I have chosen to study emigration and remittances as Italians saw them at the turn of the century: as dynamics of last resort to bring about the integration of the south within the nation and to expedite the modernization of the southern economy.

Two broad questions inspired this study. The first has to do with individual goals, strategies, and accomplishments. Italians who embraced emigration as a temporary emergency wanted to achieve some specific goals. And they embraced a set of strategies to achieve those goals. The success was assessed differently by returnees and by outsiders. Individual returnees often considered highly successful an outcome that outsiders regarded either as very modest or even counterproductive. The sad reality of the story was that many returnees became disenchanted with their return and a large number of them eventually resettled permanently in the United States. These individuals abandoned the original strategy of return migration and remittances in favor of a permanent overseas emigration only after one or more unsuccessful attempts at relocating in Italy and, most importantly, with the conviction that they had failed and wasted a number of years in the process. The second question deals with Italian society at large and with efforts made by the government and the private sector to direct the public discourse and to set in place political measures to protect remittances and returnees. In general, after an initial period of opposition to emigration, remittances and returnees were considered national assets to be integrated into the national purpose. But, of course, opinions varied as to the best course of action to be taken for such purpose. On their part, returnees seem to have been unconcerned about the large social and economic issues the nation

was attaching to their experiment. Their goals were strictly personal, and they pursued them with traditional fierce individualism.

Although perhaps of some interest in itself, such study seems to have little to do with Italian immigrants in the United States. In the larger scenario of mass return migration from 1875 to 1925, the United States was like a peripheral place, where Italians went, made money, and in the end left without regrets and without substantial personal change. In reality my contention is that we cannot understand the Italian experience in the United States without some knowledge of mass return migration to Italy, its ambivalent outcome, and the lasting legacy of such experience in those who finally settled permanently in the United States. A closer look shows that the legacy of return migration and the lasting impact of that experience have become an integral part of the total experience of Italians in the United States. Ironically, Italian experience still haunts Italians in the United States. Native Italians and Italian Americans might have conveniently forgotten past experiences. Unfortunately this lack of awareness makes the interaction between Italian Americans and American society more ambivalent.

The literature on the Italian experience in the United States is puzzling, especially the literature authored by Italian Americans. On the one hand, one such body of literature argues that Italian Americans today are successfully integrated into American society. Discrimination and prejudice did not spare the first generation, and they have not altogether disappeared. But most Italian Americans today have entered the mainstream of American life. The main reason for the Italian-American success, such literature argues, is because Italian immigrants, although poor, arrived in the United States with a set of attitudes that prepared for success in a capitalistic and democratic society.[7] On the other hand, another body of literature points out that Italian Americans are still marginal and suffer discrimination in the United States. Although many Italian Americans enjoy a degree of economic success, Americans are still uncomfortable with Italian Americans. Moreover there exists a vague suspicion that there might be a connection between every Italian American, especially if successful, and the Mafia. The conflict goes deeper, according to this interpretation. And it has to do with the fact that the Italian culture, rich in family and communal values, has not been welcomed in the United States. In October 1981, for instance, I was a participant at the American Italian Historical Association annual meeting in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Robert Viscusi, one of the speakers, argued that whereas British settlers had been able to inscribe their names all over

America, Italians were denied any meaningful part in the American experience. Viscusi concluded that Italians are still excluded from American society. The audience assented. I realized that virtually all listeners – they were educated Italian Americans – shared a common sense of alienation from American society.[8]

Can we reconcile these two interpretations? More importantly, can we determine their origins? There is no doubt that many Italian Americans have achieved a considerable degree of material success – especially in comparison with Italians who did not emigrate – and of social integration. The income of Italian Americans has been above the national average. Avoiding conspicuous consumption, they invested in real estate or a family business. Being self-reliant, they generally refused to take government benefits, even when legitimately entitled. Their allegiance to the Old World faded away rapidly, and they became confident Americans. In the last two decades a number of Italians have achieved political power and national recognition. These are no small achievements in a country in which economic success, self-reliance, patriotism, and public service are highly valued. And if the achievements of Italian Americans are compared to the poverty of the immigrant generation of eighty years ago, one should conclude that in general the Italian experience in the United States is a stunning success. Yet a number of Italian Americans, especially if educated, feel differently. They complain about the demise of their culture and tradition. They blame American society for unabated discrimination. They feel marginal and alienated. Richard Gambino's passionate account of alienation in *Blood of My Blood* might overstate the case. But he is not the only one to report a malaise.

The complaints of alienation felt by Italian Americans can be interpreted within the frame of reference of the general alienation of many intellectuals in America. American society has become highly integrated, industrialized, urban, and bureaucratic. To many, there is little room for personal freedom and individual creativity in modern America. Perhaps Italian Americans voicing alienation are simply using their ethnic past as a vehicle to react to impersonal America. They surmise that, had they been able to preserve their traditions of family and community values, they would not have felt alienated at all. In such an interpretation, the ethnic past of Italian Americans is simply an artificial construction used to express a contrast between a distasteful present and an idyllic past. But I believe that the complaints of Italian Americans are specific. And such complaints should be understood within the total experience of emigration and immigration, which embraces both Italy and the United States. In the total picture the experience of return migration played a pivotal role.

Whether in Italy before emigration, upon returning from the United States, or in the United States after permanent relocation, Italians tried to break away from their marginal status to claim a larger role in society. In societies based on market economies such transition requires a certain degree of control over economic resources. Italians tried to achieve such control initially in Italy through temporary emigration to the United States and return migration to Italy, and later through permanent relocation in the United States. But the success in Italy upon returning from the United States was at best limited. Many Italians who tried temporary emigration and return and in the end resettled permanently in the United States abandoned Italy with a sense of failure. Their efforts to become part of Italian society through temporary emigration and American savings had failed. And that sense of failure was so deep and lasted so long that it affected their American experience. It is not unlikely that the alienation of Italian Americans toward the United States is also a carry-over of the alienation they experienced because of their failed return. Perhaps, on a larger scale, the alienation of Italian Americans from American society is the transference of the deepest ancestral alienation of Italian peasants toward their past, alienation they unsuccessfully tried to overcome through temporary emigration and return migration.

At this point we can introduce an interpretive model of the experience of Italian emigrants and immigrants. Whether in Italy before the first departure, in Italy upon returning from the United States, or in the United States after final settlement there, Italians tried to break away from marginal status to claim a larger role in society by improving their financial condition. Both in Italy and the United States Italians had to face similar problems. Although in different ways, both countries were affected by the rise of large-scale capitalism, the demise of regional economies, and the shifting demands for manpower by rapidly changing production cycles. In both countries individuals experienced accelerated changes, estrangement, and alienation, as they were compelled to change old habits and assume new attitudes. In dealing with such changes, immigrants and returnees, however, were not substantially different from individuals who never embraced emigration. They simply had to cope with two societies, instead of one. And what they experienced in one society was likely to affect their experience in the other. And because Italian returnees were rather unsuccessful in their resettlement in Italy, they carried with them a deep-seated disappointment, which conditioned their American experience.

This experience of Italians was not exceptional, however. Other immigrant groups experienced America through a set of mental im-

ages and expectations carried over from the old country. Irish immigrants, for instance, experienced America as a place of exile. But as historian Kerby Miller convincingly argues, the Irish sensed themselves as exiles even in Ireland before leaving. "Historians often claim," Miller wrote, "that Irish in North America saw themselves as unhappy exiles . . . That image might derive at least as much from the Irish heritage as from the American experience."[9] The Irish developed a sense of exile in Ireland because of well-known political and social adversities. Immigration further exacerbated that sense of exile and created a tension "between past and present, ideology and reality," with mixed results. In the end, however, "both the exile motif and the world view that sustained it assured the survival identity and nationalism in the New World."

The impact of attitudes developed in the Old World explains the contrast between what seems to be a successful adjustment of Italians and Irish in America and the experience of alienation among Italians and exile among Irish. The alienation of Italians and the exile motif among Irish sprang from sources more profound than the poverty and prejudice they experienced in the New World. Alienation and exile were experiences already in place before the two groups set foot on American soil. In fact, Italian and Irish made a relatively successful adjustment to American life in the span of two generations. But that success was not profound enough to dispel deep-seated perceptions carried over from Europe. The Italian experience, especially that connected with return migration, became an integral part of the Italian experience in the United States. Obviously this shows that the history of immigration is much more than the process of change from one national identity to another. It is a different way of looking at the larger process of modernization in Europe or in the United States, whereby individuals were forced to break away from old identities and forge new ones. But each stage was deeply influenced by previous stages. Without the history of return migration, the Italian experience in the United States remains partly unexplained.

These general ideas determined the argument, the logic, and the organization of this book. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the political unification of Italy, the efforts made by the national government to integrate the south – the most disadvantaged section of the country – into the national economy, and the increasing realization among Italians that all the programs to help the south were seemingly failing. Chapter 3 discusses the main cultural characteristics of the Italian south. In facing the challenges of modernization and change, the southern ethos was both a help and a hindrance. Chapter 4 follows the growing national debate on emigration, return migration, and the

impact the phenomenon was expected to have on the south specifically and the nation at large generally. By the early 1900s many Italians had accepted the conclusion that return migration and remittances were changing the south, a result that had eluded all governmental programs. The remaining chapters discuss return migration and remittances in the south and the impact they had. Chapter 5 traces the intensity of return migration from the 1870s to 1929 through statistical indicators and other literary evidence. Chapter 6 is dedicated to remittances: how they were channeled to Italy, how they were regarded by the public and private sectors, and the fight over the control of the process. Chapter 7 explains how returnees invested the money made in America. Chapter 8 describes and illustrates regional differences in investments of American money. Chapter 9 deals with those immigrants who equated return with retirement. In addition, the chapter discusses whether the failure of return migration might have been caused by discriminating economic policies by the central government. The Conclusion attempts to synthesize how return migration and remittances should be interpreted within the larger frame of reference of Italian immigration in the United States.

This book deals almost exclusively with Italy, but it is written for Americans, and it is intended to be a contribution to the study of Italian immigration in the United States. Perhaps this study will give Americans a better understanding of the millions of Italians who in the end, by choice or by default, settled permanently in the United States. The subject is naturally of special interest to Italian Americans. I know for a fact that many immigrants were unwilling to discuss with children and grandchildren the vicissitudes of their return migration. As a matter of fact some children of immigrants discovered only after the death of their parents that the parents had owned property in Italy, a fact never discussed with the children. In many cases those properties had been bought with American savings, before the final resettlement in the United States. In this story many third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans will learn of another aspect of the tormented process that ended up with the permanent settlement of their ancestors in the United States. Italian Americans will also learn why their immigrant ancestors were so ambivalent about America and why perhaps they themselves do not feel totally at home in the United States.